

**National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)  
FY 2009 Plan for Implementation of  
The Physician's Comparability Allowance Program**

**1. Purpose:**

The purpose of this Plan is to prescribe the NASA policies and procedures for administering the Physician's Comparability Allowance Act of 1978, as amended. This Act provides that certain federally employed physicians may be authorized the payment of an allowance in return for a specified period of service. These allowances are paid only in the case of categories of physicians for which NASA is experiencing a significant recruitment and/or retention problem and are fixed at the minimum amounts necessary to deal with such problems.

PCA is critical to NASA's ability to retain flight surgeons and physicians as well as support the agency goal of maintaining a stable high quality physician workforce. NASA's physicians are required to acquire and maintain specialized experience vital to the supporting the agency's human space flight missions. Accordingly, it takes at least 18 to 24 months of extensive training in human space flight for newly hired physicians to perform independently. Absent PCA, NASA would not have the tools to maintain a stable physician workforce which would be more costly to the agency and more importantly result in a reduction in the quality of professional medical services that could potentially have a devastating impact.

PCA provides the agency the ability to negotiate salary when it is needed for recruitment and/or retention purposes. Johnson Space Center, the agency's primary main user of PCA is located in Houston, Texas which competes with some of the best medical facilities in the country. Additionally, as evidenced by the high locality rate in the Houston area, salaries are much higher than most metropolitan areas in the United States, including Washington DC. Kennedy Space Center, at Cocoa Beach, Florida is also a critical user of PCS, without which NASA's ability to maintain the experienced physician base we rely upon at the agency's main launch site could be seriously comprised.

**2. Definition:**

A physician is defined as a doctor of medicine, osteopathy or dentistry. For the purpose of consideration for an allowance, a physician must be employed under the General Schedule or in a position established under 5 USC 5376 or similar authority relating to administratively determined pay for certain scientific and professional personnel. Additionally, an individual is considered employed as a physician only if serving in a position the duties and responsibilities of which

could not be satisfactorily performed by an incumbent without those qualifications.

3. **Applicability:** An individual employed as a physician (as defined in paragraph 2) may qualify for the allowance, except for the following:
- a. Those employed on less than half-time (20 hours per week) on a regularly scheduled or intermittent basis;
  - b. Interns or residents;
  - c. Reemployed annuitants based on civilian employment in the federal or District of Columbia civil service; or
  - d. Those fulfilling an employment obligation incurred as a result of participation in a federally subsidized scholarship program.

4. **Policy:**

- a. The allowance may be paid to physicians serving in any of the following categories:
  - i. Category I: Positions primarily involving the practice of medicine or direct service to patients, involving the performance of diagnostic, preventative or therapeutic services to patients in hospitals, clinics, public health programs, diagnostic centers; and similar settings, but not including positions described in Category II below.
  - ii. Category II: Positions primarily involving the evaluation of physical fitness, of the provision of initial treatment of on-the-job illness or injury, or the performance of pre-employment examinations, preventative health screenings or fitness-for-duty examinations.
  - iii. Category III: Positions not described in Categories I and II above, including positions involving disability evaluation and rating, the performance of medical autopsies, training programs, including the administration of patient care or medical research and experimental programs.
  - iv. NASA may establish additional subdivision of the three categories of positions based on factors the Administrator determines relevant. These may include such factors as location, grade or level, medical specialization of the position and the level of qualifications sought for position in the category.
- b. Physicians in one of the above categories are eligible for an allowance only if the following conditions are met:

- i. There is positive evidence (such as vacant positions, an unacceptably high turnover rate, or significantly higher salaries in the open labor market), indicating the inability to recruit and/or retain physicians in the category to meet staffing needs;
  - ii. The qualification requirements for vacant positions do not exceed the qualifications actually necessary for positions in the category;
  - iii. Efforts have been made to recruit qualified candidates for vacant positions and/or retain physicians presently employed in positions in the category; and
  - iv. A sufficient number of qualified candidates are not available to fill the existing vacancies at the basic rate of pay that is offered.
- c. The amount of the allowance authorized will be the minimum amount necessary to address the recruitment or retention problem for each category and may not exceed:
  - i. Up to \$14,000 per annum if the employee has served as a Government physician for 24 months or less
  - ii. Up to \$24,000 per annum if the employee has served as a Government physician for 24-48 months
  - iii. Up to \$30,000 per annum if the employee has served as a Government physician for more than 48 months.

For the purposes of determining length of service, prior service as a Government physician need not have been continuous, but periods of leave without pay may not be counted. Service in the military is not creditable.

- d. Entitlement to the allowance does not accrue during a period that base pay does not accrue.
- e. Under applicable law, the allowance is considered basic pay for the thrift savings program and, provided certain conditions are met, is considered basic pay for retirement computations.
- f. The allowance is not considered as basic pay for computing maximum salary limitations, insurance entitlement, or other benefits related to basic pay. However, the allowance is subject to the aggregate pay limitation as established in 5 U.S.C. 5307.

## **5. Procedures:**

The NASA Administrator may approve payment of the allowance to individual eligible physicians in any amount that does not exceed the maximum amount established in paragraph 4c of this Plan. Approval will be contingent upon the physician executing an agreement to serve in the position described in the

agreement (Attachment 1). In accordance with Agency policy, the Administrator may delegate this authority to the Center Directors.

- a. The effective date of the agreement will be the date the agreement is signed by the physician, provided the agreement has been otherwise appropriately executed and approved. Payment of the allowance will be effective at the beginning of the first pay period that begins on or after the date of the agreement.
- b. The rate payable for the duration of the agreement will be based on the position in which the physician is serving on the effective date of the agreement.
- c. The allowance will be paid in the same manner and at the same time as basic pay.
- d. The amount paid to a physician employed 20 hours or more per week on a regularly scheduled basis but less than full time (40 hours per week), will be on a pro-rata basis of the amount which would be authorized for a full-time employee in the same position.
- e. If the physician is serving with the government under a loan repayment program, the amount of the loan being repaid will be deducted from any allowance for which the physician is eligible. Any portion of the allowance that exceeds the amount of the loan being repaid may then be paid under regular procedures.
- f. If the physician is covered under more than one comparability allowance category, an agreement may be executed under the more advantageous category.
- g. If employment of the physician is terminated during the period of the agreement and such termination is not at the employee's request or as a result of misconduct, the employee will be entitled to retain that portion of the allowance earned to the date of termination.
- h. If employment of the physician is terminated voluntarily by the employee due to separation, transfer outside of the NASA, or misconduct, the employee will be required to refund the total amount received under the agreement if they have completed less than one year of the agreement. An employee who has completed one year or more of the agreement will be required to refund the amount of the allowance earned during the 26 weeks prior to termination. The Administrator may grant exceptions to the repayment requirement when it is determined that failure to complete the agreement was necessitated by circumstances beyond the control of the employee.
- i. If the physician is serving under an agreement and becomes covered under a newly announced comparability allowance category, the agreement may be terminated and a new agreement executed to reflect the rate authorized under the newly established category. In such cases, the employee shall be entitled to retain that portion of the allowance earned under the terminated allowance.

6. NASA Centers will carefully consider the amount of the allowance to be paid to physicians in each category, taking into account current difficulties in recruiting a qualified physician, and anticipated retention problems that may be experienced in the future. In no instances will the amount be more than the maximum amount allowed under the law.

Where a separate category based on a subdivision of one of the categories has been established, the maximum allowances will be established to maintain a reasonable relationship to the maximums established for NASA-wide application.

7. The criteria in attachment 2 will be used in evaluating and determining eligibility for allowances. In making these determinations, NASA will insure that allowances are paid fairly, consistently, and equitably, and only when significant recruitment and retention problems for a particular locality exist.
8. Information and reports will be provided as required by the Office of Personnel Management and Office of Management and Budget.
9. A copy of this Plan should be made available for review by each physician employed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

## **Attachment 1**

### **Physician's Comparability Allowance Service Agreement**

1. Authority: 5 USC 5948
2. Under provisions of the above authority, a Physician's Comparability Allowance is authorized for prospective employment as follows:

NASA Center: \_\_\_\_\_

Geographic Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Position/Title and Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of regularly scheduled hours per week if employed less than full time: \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Allowance Rate: \_\_\_\_\_

Effective Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

3. As a federally employed physician, working for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, I understand that:
  - a. As a condition of accepting payment, I will serve with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as a physician from the effective date through at least the expiration dates of the agreement, unless the agreement is terminated sooner as indicated below.
  - b. If my employment in the position shown in paragraph 2 is terminated during the period of this agreement at the convenience of the government, but not at my request or as a result of my misconduct, I will be entitled to retain that portion of the allowance earned to the date of termination.
  - c. If my employment in the position shown in paragraph 2 is terminated during the period of this agreement at my request, or as a result of my misconduct, I will be required to refund the total amount received under this agreement if I have completed less than one year of the agreement. If I have completed one year or more of the agreement, I will be required to refund the amount of allowance earned during the 26 weeks prior to termination. I further agree that assignment at my request to an intermittent or less than half-time (20 hours per week) work schedule shall be equivalent to termination of this agreement at my request.

- d. If, during the period of the agreement, I become eligible for the comparability allowance under a newly announced category, I may terminate this agreement and execute a new agreement reflecting entitlement under the newly announced category, effective on the date of announcement of the newly assigned category. If I exercise this option, I will be entitled to retain that portion of the allowance earned to the date of termination.
- e. The allowance will be paid in the same manner and at the same time as my basic pay. It is considered basic pay for computing retirement entitlement, but not for insurance entitlement, or other benefits related to basic pay.
- f. The effective date of the allowance is the beginning of the first pay period that begins after the effective date of this agreement.
- g. The agreement does not in any way commit the government to continue my employment.

4. I agree to the terms and conditions stated above.

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Employee Signature

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Date

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Typed name, Position title, and grade

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Signature of Requesting Official

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Date

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Typed name and title

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Approval/Signature of NASA Center Director

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Date

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Typed name

**PHYSICIAN'S COMPARABILITY ALLOWANCE PROGRAM  
DOCUMENTATION OF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION  
PROBLEMS**

1. Indicate the Category of the position: \_\_\_\_\_
2. What selection factors, if any, above the minimum required by the GS-602 qualification standard, are used in recruiting for the position?
3. What impact does locale have on the ability to recruit and retain physicians in this category?
4. Are there any required duties that affect the ability to recruit and retain physicians? If so, describe the duties and how they affect the ability to recruit and retain physicians.
5. For the category indicated above, provide the following documentation on recruitment activities:
  - a. Number of current physician positions filled and vacant, and the length of time these positions have been vacant:
    1. Filled \_\_\_\_\_
    2. Vacant \_\_\_\_\_
    3. Average length of time positions have been vacant \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Physicians Losses:
    1. Number of physicians leaving voluntarily during the last year  
\_\_\_\_\_
    2. Reason for leaving  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Number of positions filled during the last year.
    1. By scholarship obligated physicians \_\_\_\_\_
    2. By individuals in loan repayment programs \_\_\_\_\_
    3. By other means \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Describe recruitment efforts (area covered, methods, contact made, etc.).



- e. Average number of physician applications which must be screened before qualified candidates can be found \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. Average number of qualified physicians referred for each position filled \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. Interviews:
    - 1. Of those interviewed for each position, how many are found unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_
    - 2. What were the reasons for the unacceptability?
  - h. Rejections:
    - 1. Average number of physicians who reject an offer of employment for each position filled \_\_\_\_\_
    - 2. What were the reasons for the rejection of offers:
6. Describe your efforts to retain physicians in this category (e.g., changes in working conditions, use of paramedical personnel to assist physicians in routine duties, etc.).
7. How does the turnover rate for physicians in this category (total personnel losses in relation to employment) compare to the total turnover rate for all positions?

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Signature and Title of Individual Providing Information

Date